

Elise Roy: Design for Disability Benefits All

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Ms. Roy in her TEDx talk in September 2015. (Yuri Horowitz)

Elise Roy believes that design for disability often develops better solutions than design for the norm. And, having a keen observation and adaptation to the environment is the key to success in addressing problems.

Roy is a design thinker, artist, human rights advocate, and a former disability rights lawyer. She became deaf at the age of ten. However, Roy considered losing her hearing as “one of the greatest gifts [she has] ever received,” and it offered her a unique experience of the world. She was able to look at the world “sideways”, and better observe and adapt to the environment that helped to inform her solution to real-world problems.

To Roy, design thinking is “a process for innovation and problem solving.” It involves defining and empathizing with the problem, brainstorming ideas, testing, and ensuring sustainability. She then quoted Warren Berger, an American journalist, that design thinking brings multiple perspectives together to create something new.

Roy has been a design thinker in multiple fields.

In work, Roy always adapted the environment and generated fresh rather than “predetermined” solutions to problems she observed. While she was working in Haiti with 300 hundred deaf

individuals, one organization supplied poultry such as goats and chickens, but the animals were stolen because the deaf residents did not hear the thieves when they came in the middle of the night. Targeting this issue, Roy thought about creating a solar light to light up a secure pen to ensure the poultry's safety at night. That organization's ignorance made Roy further confirm the need for careful observation and adaptation in design thinking.

In school, Roy advocated for people with non-normative abilities and the designer for multiple problem-solving objects for those people. For example, to avoid unnecessary injury in using tools for disability people, she invented a pair of safety glasses that visually alerts the user to pitch changes in those tools before the human ear could hear it. Furthermore, the OXO potato peeler Roy invented was so comfortable that not only helped people with arthritis, but also expanded its popularity in the mainstream.

In sports, Roy was a former soccer player on the national team level. Her trick to excel was to cleverly transform hearing loss to more visual attention – to observe the surrounding environment in a wider scope and with faster observation.

On the road of design thinking, deafness seemed to be more of an assist to Roy rather than an obstacle. She created change in the world by promoting design thinking for disability as a way to address social issues and benefit people, whether disabled or not. In the projects she has done, Roy produced social impact and offered real help to those in need from a unique perspective of careful observation, adaptation, and human-centered design research.

Roy encouraged the audience that everyone is a designer and capable of making changes to where in need.